Author: Dalen, Dorrit van
Title: There is no doubt. Muslim scholarship and society in 17th-century Central Sudanic Africa
Issue Date: 2015-04-22

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Dramatis loci

This chapter describes historical developments in the environment where al-Wālī lived, paying extra attention to two issues in the social organisation of life there, that have a bearing on his work: the relation between slavery and the Muslim identity and the competition between Islam and traditional religions. The picture that arises is one of troubled times marked by political instability, droughts, a movement of Islam from the urban centres to rural areas, and a changing position of scholars.

1. A history of Bornu and Baghirmi as Islamic states

A contemporary of al-Wālī, the Timbuktu historian al-Saʿdī wrote in 1655: 'We have heard it said […] that there are four sultans in the world [apart from the sultan in Constantinople]: in Baghdad, Cairo, Bornu and Malli'.[68] The glory of al-Saʿdī's own country, 'Malli', was in fact bygone, but that of Bornu was at its zenith. The sultanate of Bornu was situated – as the province Bornu is today in a sahelian landscape, with mountains and plains, and soils of sand or clay.[69] Through it runs the river Yobe, from west to east, and empties in Lake Chad. The northern part, where vegetation is sparse, is suitable for cattle. Nomadic Fulani and Shuwa Arabs lived there in the rainy season, from June to September and then moved south some time after the rains. To the south the land is more wooded, marked here and there by spectacular Baobab trees, and the agricultural season is somewhat longer. During the rainy season millet and sorghum and some vegetable crops were grown, but the soil did not produce much, and stocking methods did not always protect against mould, rodents or insects. At the end of the hot and dry season (March, April, and May), stocks would often run out, as they still do, and people went hungry.

Bornu was populated by speakers of Afro-Asiatic (e.g. Kotoko, Buduma) and Saharan (e.g. Kanuri and Kanembu) languages, but starting in the fifteenth century there was a gradual convergence of ethnic identities into the Kanuri identity.[70] Villages were typically composed of eighty to two hundred families when the German explorer Gustav Nachtigal (d. 1885) travelled there in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and the continuity of this size into modern times allows for the assumption that it was probably the same in the seventeenth century. Peasants who lived there handed over part of their crops to the village chief, who paid the village's taxes to the king in Birni Gazargamu, in return for protection in case of attacks.

Birni Gazargamu was a walled town. When Barth described its ruins in 1852 (it fell to ruin after it was conquered by the Fulani in the Sokoto jihad, and was replaced by Kuka as the capital of Bornu in 1814), he noted that the perimeter of the walls of 'Birni Kadīm' (literally the old walled city) measured 'little more than six' miles and had six or seven gates.[71] At the centre was the palace of the *mai* or king, a 'very large' building of red brick.[72] There were four Friday mosques and the town was divided in wards for people from different clans or villages, each of which had their own chief.

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[68] Mahmūd al-Kati, *Tarikh es-soudan*. Edité & traduit par O. Houdas and M. Delafosse. Paris: Adrien Maissonneuve, 1964, 65.
[69] For a more extensive description of the geography and social organisation of Bornu in the 19th century, see L. Brenner 1973.
[70] D. Gronenborn, 'Kanem-Borno - a brief summary of the history and archaeology of an empire in the central Bilad-El-Sudan.' In *West Africa during the Atlantic slave trade: archaeological perspectives.* C.R. DeCorse ed., New York: Leicester University Press, 2001: 108-136.
[71] Brenner (1973, 20) reports that the perimeter of the walls was about two miles.
[72] Barth 1857, III, 29-30.

Common people lived in houses made of banco (mud and dung) with thatch roofs, the same as were built in villages. Some court-yards were lined with straw mats that were renewed every dry season, giving golden accents to the neighbourhoods. Evergreen trees provided shade in the streets. Within the town walls there was also space to raise crops in times of danger. The town's society was stratified. The elite was formed by people who held a function at the royal court – positions that were all hereditary - and by scholars. Below them ranked specialised artisans, then people who had no other income then from farming. In all of these groups most people owned slaves, who, in principal, ranked lowest, although some held court positions and therefore power.

The market of Birni Gazargamu was a final destination for caravans from Tunis, Tripoli and Cairo in the north, from Timbuktu, Awdaghust, Agades and Gao in the west, from Kordofan and the Nile regions in the east. There, labourers unloaded silk, carpets, weapons and books from the Middle East, paper and glass beads from Venice, leather products, copperware and tobacco from the Maghrib and gold and kola nuts from Asante in the south. For weeks and months on end dozens of camels, horses and cattle were parked on the edge of the market place. In the central sections of the market local goods were offered on grass mats on the ground such as vegetables, oil and household tools of calabash, wood and straw, baskets filled with sorghum and millet, and calabashes with milk and butter that cattle herders would bring in. Economic success was one of the pillars of Bornu's grandeur.

In al-Wālī's time, Bornu was a kingdom or a sultanate (the ruler was called *mai,* a Kanuri word, as well as sultan) with an ancient Muslim history, which had started in the tenth or eleventh century in Kanem, northeast of Bornu. Our knowledge of those first traces of Islam south of the Sahara comes from Arabic authors in the Middle East and al-Andalus, who collected their data from travellers - mostly merchants - and recorded them on to serve commerce as well as the science of geography. They reveal that almost as soon as the first generations of Muslims had conquered Egypt, they started to explore the opportunities for trade with people on the other side of the desert, in *bilād al-sūdān*. From Egypt, a number of trade routes passed west through Ifriqya (North Africa) before turning to the kingdoms of Ghana in the westernmost part of the continent, and Mali in the bend of the Niger. This region was also referred to as 'Takrūr', a name that has led 'a very mobile existence' in Arabic literature, as Hunwick remarked, but gradually came to signify the western part of sudanic Africa.[73] What attracted the Muslim traders most to the western routes was gold. They sold textiles, horses and copper. Another route descended from Tripoli straight through the desert, via the market towns of Kawar and Zawīla in the Lybian region of the Fezzan, to end in Kanem, which was to become the cradle of the dynasty that is said to have ruled in the Lake Chad region for a thousand years, from the ninth to the nineteenth century.[74] Al-Ya'qūbī (d. 872) and al-Bakrī (d. 1094) knew of the existence of Kanem (or Kānim), south of Zawīla[75], as a place that was pagan. In the ninth century Kanem was ruled by Zaghāwa, nomads from the Sahara who had moved south towards Lake Chad and become semi-sedentarised when the Sahara desiccated. They subjected and mingled with the local, sudanic population and based their new wealth on the sale of slaves, salt and natron which they sold in Zawīla, where the people 'are Muslims, all of them, and go on pilgrimage to Mecca.'[76]

Ibn Sa'īd (d. 1286) was the first author to mention that Kanem was Muslim and was ruled by a sultan, but the actual change seems to have taken place earlier, in the eleventh century. It was a result of commercial contacts, but how it came about exactly is not certain. The most important caravan routes crossing the Sahara were maintained by North African Berbers. The form of Islam they practised in those first centuries was Ibadism, a more moderate doctrine within Kharijism. The population of

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[73] J.O. Hunwick, 'Notes on a late fifteenth-century document concerning 'al-Takrur''. In *African Perspectives. Papers in the history, politics an economics of Africa. Presented to Thomas Hodgkin*. Ch. Allen & R.W. Johnson ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, 9.
[74] The history of the origin of the dynasty is not certain, see below.
[75] According to Yāqūt (d. 1229) Kānim was 'forty stages' away from Zawīla. For a great number of descriptions of peoples and rulers in the bilād al-sūdān by these authors and many others, see J.F.P. Hopkins and N. Levtzion eds., *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000.
[76] Al-Ya'qūbī in Hopkins and Levtzion 2000, 22.

Zawīlā was Ibāḍiyya and although very few direct written sources of their movements have survived[77], it is likely that Ibaḍī Berbers, alongside their trading relationships with merchants from Kanem, converted the elite of Kanem. However, Kanem also had relations to the Maghrib, from where the Almoravids (r. 1071-1147), suppressing Ibadism, propagated an austere form of Malikism, one of the four main the legal schools of Islam and the one that has been dominant in Africa ever since.[78] Somewhere in the eleventh century Kanems ruling dynasty adopted Malikism as well. Perhaps concomitantly it claimed descent from an ancestor from the Ḥijāz, Sayf b. Dhī Yazan, and from then on was called Sefuwa (or Sayfuwa) after him. The Sefuwa dynasty's history was put down in a king-list, the *Dīwān al-salāṭīn,* which was recited and added to for centuries as an oral tradition, before it was written down, probably for the first time in the sixteenth century.[79]

The increasing dominance of Islamic networks on the trade routes stimulated the development of the states of Ghana, Mali and Kanem, all three of which were, by the eleventh century, nominally Muslim: their rulers had Muslim names and professed adherence to Islam, but often retained traditional religions too, while common people were hardly knew of the new religion. The origins of the Hausa states, in between Songhay and Bornu, also stem from this period, but Islam seems to have arrived there later. Until the end of the eighteenth century, when ʿUthmān dan Fodio (d. 1817) incorporated them in his grand Sokoto caliphate, the historical role of the Hausalands had been limited by the fact that they were never united and were at times tributary to Songhay and at times dominated by Bornu-Kanem.

At its apogee in the thirteenth century, Kanem's power reached from the province Bornu in the west to the Fezzan in the north. However, the state suffered from continuous attacks by the Bilala, its neighbours who lived near Lake Fitri to the east. Unable to put an end to the assaults, the Sefuwa dynasty finally moved westward, towards the end of the fifteenth century, to Bornu. In 1472 they established a new capital there, on the river Yobe, and named it Gazargamu or Gasreggomo or Birni Bornu. Kanem-Bornu, as it is often called in the literature, soon became one of the most important states in west and central Africa. Via Tripoli, it was connected to Egypt and other centres of what had been, since 1517, the Ottoman Empire, and via Songhay – successor to the state of Mali in the fifteenth and sixteenth century – it was connected to the routes to the Maghrib. Around 1500 al-Hassan al-Wazzān (d. ca 1554), also known as Leo Africanus, travelled through west and central Sudān. He explained that all the kingdoms of the region were in fact subject to only three kings, that is to the king of 'Tombuto', whose territory was the largest, to the king of Bornu, and to the king of Gaoga (presumably the kingdom of the Bilala), who ruled over 'the rest'.[80]

'Tombuto' or Timbuktu was one of the wealthy cities of Songhay, indeed the greatest empire when Leo Africanus made his journey. Centred in the region just east of the bend of the Niger, it stretched from the Gambia estuary in the west to the Hausa states and often even further, to the frontiers of Bornu in the east. To the north, many Berber speaking, nomadic populations in the Sahara were tributary to Songhay. Its major cities – Timbuktu, Djenne, Gao - were situated on crossroads on the routes of the gold trade from Akan (in present day Ghana) and were also linked to the networks –

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[77] There are some archeologic traces, which J. Schacht exploited in an article entitled 'Sur la diffusion des formes d'architecture religieuse musulmane à travers le Sahara.' *Travaux de l'Institut de Recherches Sahariennes*, xi (1954), 11-27.

[78] For a discussion of Almoravid history in the Maghrib and its influence in sudanic Africa, see N. Levtzion, `Abd Allah b. Yasin and the Almoravids.' In *Studies in West African Islamic History*. J.R. Willis ed. London: Frank Cass, 1979. I. And see O. Meunier who argues that Ibadism may have been important in the region for a much longer period, until the sixteenth or seventeenth century. O. Meunier, *Les routes de l'Islam. Anthropologie politique de l'islamisation de l'Afrique de l'ouest en général en du pays Hausa en particulier du VIII^e au XIX^e siècle.* Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997.

[79] This tradition seems to place the first Muslim sultan of Kanem in 1067. See D. Lange 1977, 67. Meunier (1997) argues that this sultan Hāwā was perhaps not the first Muslim ruler, but the first one who was Mālikī.

[80] R. Brown ed., *The History and description of Africa and of the notable things therein contained, written by al-Hassan Ibn-Mohammed al-Wezaz al-Fasi, a Moor, baptised as Giovanni Leone, but better known as Leo Africanus*. London: Hakluyt Society, 1896. I, 128.

commercial and scholarly - of the Mediterranean, from al-Andalus to Cairo. Songhay's welfare and learning, and then its collapse had significant impacts on political, social and cultural developments throughout West Africa. Both when it was wealthy and afterwards, its most remarkable contributions were perhaps in scholarship, in particular theology and history.

In the field of theology, Songhay has left its mark on the region in various ways – firstly because the rich libraries and scholars of Djenne and Timbuktu attracted seekers of knowledge from other sudanic regions[81], and secondly because one of its early rulers, Askia Muḥammad (r. 1493-1528) sought advice regarding good Muslim governance and good Muslim behaviour from two important theologians from abroad: the prolific Egyptian scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. ca 1505) and the renowned North African jurist and exemplary exponent of austere Maghribi Malikism Muḥammad ʻAbd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī (d. 1504) The requests paved the way for their far-reaching influence in the region. Both scholars grasped the chance, also to promote their ideas to other Muslim kings in Africa. Al-Suyūṭī did so only in writing , al-Maghīlī wrote and travelled to Gao himself to explain his views in person.[82] He warned his interlocutors that mixing pagan practices with Islam amounts to *shirk* or polytheism, and that jihād against people who are guilty of 'mixed Islam' is better than jihād against unbelievers. He preached against illegal taxes and other exploitative practices of the political elite, but also against music, and when the case presented itself, in favour of jihād against Jews. On his journey he also spent time in the Hausalands of Kano and Katsina, and he sent two epistles to Kano's ruler Muḥammad Rumfa (d. 1499).

Songhay's great prosperity ran out when, in 1591, the Moroccan ruler Mawlay Aḥmad al-Mansūr (r. 1578-1603), in need of income, sent his soldiers to the gold-markets of Timbuktu, subjected Songhay and placed the sultanate under military rule in 1591.[83] With that intervention, political, economic and ecological developments that had been building up for a long time but hidden behind the apparent stability of Songhay, were kindled and flared up.

For a time the Moroccon army commanders kept the trade routes open and commerce continued to function. However, conflicts among them weakened their control and they lost power, on the one hand to Berber (notably Tuareg) neighbours who succeeded in seizing tracts of Songhay land, and on the other to mercenaries on whom they depended to fight the Tuareg. The absence of state control along the trade routes made way for brigands and bandits, and the lack of security seriously impeded local as well as long-distance trade. In the same period the Ottoman trade along the routes of northern Africa suffered from fierce competition around the Mediterranean with Christians from the coast of France and the Italian city states. Now these routes, which had been linked to the Maghrib and Songhay, were often cut off by conflicts and banditry. With the commercial foundation of their power gone, Songhay's old ruling class could not regain authority. The cities on the western trade routes in and beyond Songhay saw an exodus and a decline of urban culture as a result of the declining trade.

Another development that culminated in this period was desiccation. In the seventeenth century severe droughts were recorded. Over centuries, increasing aridity changed the relations between farmers and herders on the southern edge of the Sahara and gave mobile pastoral groups tactical advantages over

[81] B.S. Hall and C.C. Stewart 2011.
[82] The Askia's questions and al-Suyūṭī's answers to him and to the kings of Agades, Katsina, Sūdān and Takrūr in general, are a rich source of information about local practices there. See Hunwick 1988. Also J.O. Hunwick, 'Askia al-Ḥājj Muḥammad and his successors: the account of al-imām al-Takrūrī.' *Sudanic Africa* Vol I (1990): 85-89; Also J.O. Hunwick, Shari'a in Songhay: the replies of al-Maghili to the questions of Askia al-Ḥājj Muḥammad. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. And H.T. Norris, *The Tuareg – Their Islamic Legacy and its Diffusion in the Sahel*. Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1975, 41-48. Regarding al-Maghīlī, see J.O. Hunwick, 'Al-Mahīlī and the Jews of Tawāt: the demise of a community.' *Studia Islamica*, 61 (1985): 155-183. 177.
[83] That event itself was the result of the collapse of al-Andalus and of the shift of the global economic landscape in the sixteenth century, after the European discoveries of the routes around the Cape of Good Hope and to the new world. It was a period when the Islamic world lost terrain to European powers, something that was certainly noticeable in al-Andalus and reverberated as far as central sudanic Africa. Morocco was directly affected by the economic and political changes, and looked for new opportunities in the African hinterland.

sedentary communities. When the state of Songhay disappeared, the vacuum was filled by smaller political formations of pastoral Southern Saharan, Arabic or Berber speaking groups, who came to dominate the sedentary peoples. Among the Berber populations, relations changed as well. At an ideological level, the competition for authority led to a separation between 'warrior' and clerical lineages, in which the former were socially superior, while both were superior to 'black', non-Muslim and non-Arabic speaking groups.[84] The clerical lineages increasingly founded their authority on their specialisation in Islamic religious knowledge. Politically, the changing relations in the Southern Sahara led to the migration of some Berber groups, who left their traditional territorial and political realm and turned to the south, for instance to Bornu, to look for new pastures.[85] At the same time, small pagan kingdoms on the southern borders of the old empire of Songhay, whose rulers had for centuries been subjected to and exploited by the urban Muslim elites, regained their independence.

The historical period after the conquest of Songhay is commonly regarded as a watershed in the history of West Africa. Initially however, the floods did not affect Hausa and Bornu-Kanem, or rather, they were at first beneficial. As a result of the decline in stability along the western trans-Sahara routes, part of the trade moved to the safer eastern routes. The Hausa states were relieved from the frequent invasions from Songhay and notably Kano and Katsina flourished, also as cities of learning. For the ruling elite of Bornu, the sixteenth century was a time of further expansion of its authority. After continued trouble with the Bilala in the early sixteenth century, Mai Idrīs Alūma (r. 1580-1617) was able to conquer their land as well as most of Hausaland, and to beat the Tuareg of Aïr in the Southern Sahara as well as the Tubu of Bilma and Tibesti. The conquest of the latter gave Bornu full control of the central Saharan trade routes. Diplomatic relations were maintained with Tunisia, Tripoli and the Ottoman rulers in Egypt. At the same time, trade to the south, to the land of the Asante, became more regular.[86] Bornu's conquests, but also the reinforcement of Islamic rule and the peace and prosperity of the time, were laid down in a chronicle by a scholar in the mai's service, Ibn Furṭū (fl. 1576, 1578). The first three quarters of the seventeenth century, up to and including the reign of Mai 'Alī b. Umar (r. 1636-1676) was a period of consolidation, of power and prosperity.

In this period Bornu was organised as a full-fledged Muslim state, with a Muslim administration in which scholars were engaged as judges, ministers and members of the advisory council to the sultan (who was also called caliph) and where the function of the *imām al-kabīr*, or imam of the central mosque, was a state office. Birni Gazargamu was a centre of higher learning which attracted ʿulamāʾ from the entire Niger-Chad region.[87] Especially Mai 'Umar b. Idrīs (r. 1619-1639) and his son Mai 'Alī b. 'Umar supported Muslim learning in several ways. They invited scholars to their court, and gave others land in more remote parts of the country, where they could settle with their pupils and propagate Islam. The scholars not only received financial support, they were also supported by the interest the Mais took in their work and their participation in scholarly discussions.[88] According to the *Diwān al-salaṭīn* Mai 'Alī himself was not only pious, but also 'a courageous man and a great thinker'. His personal learning led to the belief that he could bring books from al-Azhar whenever he needed them, just by stretching out his arm.[89] The strong scholarly network in the capital also made

[84] B. Hall, 'The Question of "Race" in the Pre-colonial Southern Sahara.' In *The Journal of North African Studies*, 10, 3-4 (2005) 339-367.
[85] C.C. Stewart, 'Southern Saharan Scholarship and the *Bilad al-Sudan*. In *Journal of African History*, XVII, I (1976): 73-93. 78; Gronenborn, 125.
[86] Bornu exported slaves and imported kola nuts and cowry shells from Asante, which were used as money. P.E. Lovejoy, 'Islamic Scholarship and Understanding History in West Africa before 1800.' *Oxford History of Historical Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 214. See also R. Law and P.E. Lovejoy, 'Borgu in the Atlantic Slave Trade.' *African Economic History* 27 (1999).
[87] See e.g. J.E. Lavers, 'Islam in the Bornu Caliphate, a survey.' *Odu* 5 (1971): 35.
[88] Lange 1977, 56 and 81. M.N. Alkali, Kanem-Borno under the Sayfawa. Maiduguri, 2013. 255-258; 286-292.
[89] J.E. Lavers 1981, 216-233. Likewise, the fact that he made the pilgrimage four times translated in the belief that he could fly like a bird.

room for the activities of specialists such as calligraphers, and the fame of the beautiful Qur'āns they produced spread far and wide.[90]

But the tide began to turn. In Aïr, a rival faction of one that Bornu had supported in an attempt to suppress Tuareg animosities, regained power and control over the trade route to Tripoli, and resumed its attacks on Bornu. In 1667 – when al-Wālī must have been a young man - Birni Gazargamu was actually besieged at the same time by Tuareg from the north and by warriors from the pagan Jukun of the Benue valley south of Bornu. The city withstood the attacks, but this was a sign of the beginning of the political decline of Bornu's power. Constant attacks from outside weakened its government and its control over vassal kingdoms and chieftaincies. As the authority of the Sefuwa dynasty dwindled, the power of the leaders of subjected people in the countryside increased. Having no interest in the trans-Sahara trade, they used their force to raid their neighbours to increase their income. The breakdown of security was a burden to Bornu's peasants. Those who were not already employed by the government to defend the borders, had to defend their own villages and not many hands were left to till the land. It led to famine and there was a particularly severe one near the end of the rule of Mai ʿAlī.[91]

Bornu maintained its reputation as the most powerful kingdom in central Africa until the beginning of the nineteenth century.[92] Then the state came under considerable pressure from the new sultanate of Fulani Muslim reformers established to the west of Bornu, with Sokoto as its capital. The Sokoto sultanate attempted to incorporate Bornu as well. The Sefuwa dynasty almost succumbed, but was saved by the scholarly pleas - that Bornu was not a pagan country - as well as the military leadership of a shaykh, Muḥammad al-Kānemī (r. 1810-1837). Not long afterwards however, the last Sefuwa *mai* was put to death in the power struggle between the dynasty and al-Kānemī's son and successor, shaykh or 'shehu' 'Umar (r.1837-1880), the man who would later be such a generous host to the German travellers Adolf Overweg and Heinrich Barth (in 1851) and Gustav Nachtigal (between 1870 and 1873). Having a new ruling family, however, did not change Bornu's fate. Already before the arrival of the colonial powers, the state was losing its grip on vassal kingdoms such as those of Baghirmi, Kotoko, Logone and Musgu.

Baghirmi

Even more than Bornu, Baghirmi was the area where al-Wālī was at home. However, as opposed to those that Bornu suffered through, its historical vicissitudes up to the nineteenth century remain obscure. Written sources of information about or from the region from before that time are rare. Like Bornu, Baghirmi is a region of savanna land and almost entirely flat. From the south two large rivers, the Logone and the Chari flow to Lake Chad, merging before they reach the Lake. Trees to the south are numerous, but to the north there is a barren land of 'sand and emptiness', wrote Muḥammad Bello, and 'nobody lives there, except, for part of the year, Berbers and Arabs with their cattle'.[93]

Due to the relative impermeability of the soil, large parts of Baghirmi are inundated and marshy for six or seven months every year (from the start of the rainy season in July until the end of the high water of the Logone in February), so that communities there were and are isolated during that time. Long

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[90] In the 19th century these Qur'āns sold in North Africa for forty of fifty *thaler*. D. Denham, H. Clapperton, W. Oudney, *Narrative of Travels and discoveries in northern and central Africa, in 1822, 1823 and 1824, extending across the great desert etc.* London: John Murray, 1831: II, 161-62. Some copies, collected by Hiskett, are now at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London and were described by D. Bondarev, 'The language of the glosses in the Bornu quranic manuscripts.' In *BSOAS* 69, 1 (2006). 113-140.
[91] The famine called Dāl Dāma in the *Dīwān al-salaṭīn.* See also M. Hiskett, *The course of Islam in Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994.
[92] Brenner 1973, 22.
[93] Or. 14.063, 3r. A modern edition of Bello's *Infāq al-maysūr* was published was made by C. E. J. Whitting, *Infaku'l Maisuri.* London: Luzac & Company, 1951. It is however not always accurate. For this quote see Whitting, page 4.

distance traders had no business in Baghirmi and right up to the present day there have been no important markets in the region. In the seventeenth century, the only foreigners who ventured there were slave-raiders from Bornu and sometimes preachers.

The populations of the region lived in villages with village-chiefs, but without political authority on a more central level until the beginning of the sixteenth century. From oral history it appears that the kingdom was founded at the beginning of the sixteenth century.[94] The first *Muslim* king or sultan was ‘Abdallāh (r. 1568-1608). According to a tradition recorded by Nachtigal, he invited four learned Fulani, who had designed and consecrated his palace in Massenya for him, to settle in four different villages, in order to attract people and teach Islam in his small country.[95] Two of these villages were called ‘Abger Fellati’ and ‘Abger Shuwa’—that is, Fulani and Arab Abgar. That repartition reflects the historic arrival, more or less simultaneously with the Fulani, of Arabic speaking people described as Baggara Arabs or Shuwa Arabs, who migrated from the east (a wide area in today’s Sudan) and settled in Baghirmi as semi-nomadic inhabitants. (Compare the narrative in section 4 of chapter 3.) Eventually, their colloquial Arabic would form the basis of the Arabic spoken throughout the region, but in the seventeenth century, it had not yet spread to other populations. [96] However, Baghirmi started to be gradually written into Islamic-Arabic history: for instance, the name of the land of its most important ethnic group, the Barma or Bagharma, was explained as deriving from Arabic *baggar mī*, meaning ‘a hundred cows’.[97]

The sultanate of Baghirmi became a vassal kingdom to Bornu on an irregular basis, and a ‘sub-contractor’ for slaves who had been captured among the populations living south of Baghirmi.[98] At times it was virtually independent, but towards the end of the eighteenth century the small sultanate was overpowered by Wadai, another young sultanate to the east, which Muḥammad Bello believed had God’s support in this action, because the Sultan of Baghirmi was extremely sinful and had married his own daughter.[99]

Relations with the Ottoman Empire.

African scholars, merchants, pilgrims – roles that were often held by one and the same person – travelled to Mecca and Medina, to Cairo and other Middle Eastern cities on the route, which since 1516 had belonged to the Ottoman Empire. (Slaves also travelled this route, but they have left hardly any traces, to their contemporaries or to us.) One of the successes Ibn Furṭū reported in the *Diwān al-salaṭīn* was the visit of a diplomatic delegation from the Lord of Istanbul to Birni Gazargamu. For both parties, the Ottomans and the Sefuwa, the visit must have been of great symbolic significance, but it did not lead to further official relations between them. Bornu did not become a part of the Ottoman Empire. However, its rulers, scholars and believers, like those of other Sudanic Muslim regions, did recognise the Ottoman state as the leader of the Muslim world, its sultan as the keeper of the keys of the two holy cities. An undated manuscript from Bornu (Paden 76), refers to a decree that was issued by the sultan of Isṭanbūl, probably early in the seventeenth century, in which he prohibited smoking. It was dispatched to ‘all the places under his dominion’ (*fī mulkihi*), not only to the inhabitants of places that did fall under his rule, such as Mecca, Medina, Kufa and Basra, but also to Fez, Sind, India and

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[94] For a comparison of sources and their data see A. Vivien, ‘Essay de Condordance de cinq tables genéalogiques du Baguirmi (Tchad).’ In *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 37, 1 (1967): 25-40.
[95] Nachtigal 1974, III, 401 ff. Cf Barth 1857, II, 549 and III, 115, where he writes that two Fulani settlements were founded in Baghirmi in the second half of the 16th century.
[96] U. Braukämper, ‘The origin of Baggara Arab Culture.’ In *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika* 14 (1993), 13-46. And J.C. Zeltner, *Histoire des Arabes sur les rives du lac Tchad*. Paris: Karthala, 2002; 7-20.
[97] According to one story a hundred cows were sacrificed for the miraculous survival in a fire of a baby who was to become king of Baghirmi. See V. Pâques. ‘Origine et caractères du pouvoir royal au Baguirmi.’ In: *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 37, 1 (1967), 183-214; 186.
[98] S. MacEachern, ‘State formation and Enslavement in the Southern Lake Chad Basin.’ In *West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade. Archaeological Perspectives*. C.R. DeCorse (ed.) New York: Leicester University Press, 2001.
[99] Or. 14.063, 3r.

Rūm, and to Adar (*ʻAdhar*), a name that might refer to a Tuareg town in the Southern Sahara. It is not quite clear how the writer of this manuscript interpreted the authority of the Ottoman Sultan, but apparently it did make a big impression, at least in Bornu. Ottoman politics, including the state's choice of a religious ideology, must have influenced the possibilities and interests of African scholars to some extent.

Recent scholarship has dismantled the narrative of the decline of the Ottoman Empire after the 'classical age' (1300 to 1600) and demonstrated that until the nineteenth century, the Ottoman state successfully adjusted to political, social and institutional changes within its own borders and in the world around, and was economically and politically on par with Europe. Nevertheless, Karen Barkey observes that the seventeenth century was a period of doubt about the strength of the empire, in which the Ottomans fought many wars and lost a lot of territory. [100] Internally, they encountered widespread heterodox Muslim religious and sectarian dissent, with some forces pushing for more syncretism and less imperial domination, and others, notably the Kadizadeli religious reformists, pushing for puritanism. Barkey argues that the organisational system of the Ottomans had most trouble with amorphous movements, and therefore, while it had a tradition of tolerance towards non-Muslim populations, vigorously persecuted mystical orders. At the same time, for strategic reasons, the state tended to side with the puritanists. Its legitimacy became increasingly based on orthodox Sunni Islam.

2. Spread of Islam to rural areas

Ever since the introduction of Islam in sudanic Africa, the rulers of Muslim states had invited scholars and religious men to settle near their courts, to add prestige and *baraka* to their kingship. Others were offered land rights in rural regions, where they were instrumental in the rulers' strategy to attract new settlers to underexploited land and to control remote areas. From contracts or *maḥrams* from Bornu specifically, we know that ʿulamāʾ there were granted privileges such as the right to levy taxes from their villages, and were themselves exempt from the payment of taxes and other civic duties.[101] For a long time, however, the influence of the ʿulamāʾ on the religion of the local population, in towns or rural areas throughout the region was limited. In general, rulers did not expect commoners to convert. Although sometimes common people may have witnessed rituals of prayer, consecration or healing, and may have sought to be involved in them for their own interest, they usually remained pagan. [102] At the same time, the devotion of kings and vassal kings who employed literate Muslims, controlled Muslim trading activities and did professed Islam, was most often partial. Of overriding importance was the fact that their authority over their own people remained firmly rooted in traditional religions, and in their relations – directly or via priests - with territorial spirits. When they accepted support from Islam, they did not renounce their original religion. This implied that ʿulamāʾ who depended on these elites – could not avoid compromise. Presenting their patrons with a diluted form of Islam, they accepted a role in which they accommodated their authority.[103]

This pattern, too, changed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when three important, interrelated and simultaneous developments took place throughout West Africa: first, a call for reform of uncompromising Islam was made; secondly, Islam began to spread from urban centres and elites to more rural populations; thirdly, there was the popularisation of a strain of Islam that was propagated

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[100] K. Barkey, *Empire of Difference. The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008. Chapter 5.
[101] H. Bobboyi 1993.
[102] Only the sultans of Kanem, as soon as they adopted Islam in the eleventh century, appear to have urged their population to convert to Islam too. (Although Lange suspects that even to them, 'l'Islam importait peu face à la raison d'Etat.' Lange 1977, 72, n. 6.) The result was that in the thirteenth century enough students and pilgrims from Kanem travelled to Mekka to inspire the African sultan to open and finance a madrassa – school and hostel - for them in Cairo, where they could stay and study with respected teachers for long periods. Al-Maqrizī in Hopkins and Levtzion 2000, 353. It was still in existence in the seventeenth century, reports Lavers 1971, 35.
[103] Cf M. Hiskett, 'An Islamic tradition of reform in the Western Sudan from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.' In *BSOAS.* XXV, 3 (1962): 577-596.

by less learned religious experts. These developments mark the intellectual and social context of al-Wālī's work. How the changes took place and how they were related, have hardly been explored yet, but a good way to start is by looking at the ʿulamāʾ, who, as Levtzion pointed out, were principal agents of all three changes.[104]

Until these changes, and for the sake of analysis, two types of ʿulamāʾ (including imams, quranic teachers, qāḍīs and scholars) can be distinguished. On the one hand there were the 'compromising' ones, who lived in the political centres and rendered religious services to the ruling and royal class. On the other hand were those who aimed more exclusively to represent normative Islam, and could do so because they functioned more independently from the courts, deriving their income from commerce[105] or from the agricultural labour of students and slaves, in the case of ʿulamāʾ who lived in autonomous Muslim communities outside of urban centres.[106] The main orientation of this second group was towards Islam as it was taught in scholarly literature produced especially in the Middle East and North Africa. Through their travels, correspondence and reading, the ʿulamāʾ of normative Islam often 'maintained a high standard of Islamic scholarship, had connections with other centres of learning in the Muslim world, and were concerned with the application of the Islamic law.'[107] To the local socio-political systems, however, their theology and religious practice were marginal. Now, these ʿulamāʾ became increasingly pre-occupied with the gap they perceived between normative Islam and 'popular', 'compromising', 'corrupt' or 'mixed' Islam, and it inspired them in their attempts to achieve reform.

Reform, indeed, became the catchword of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The theologians' ambition to reform, to change the habits of believers so that they would comply with what the theologians saw as pure Islam and to shape society in accordance with an Islamic model could be combined with a desire for social change among commoners, and so become the ideological core of the movement that led to the establishment, from Futa Toro in the south western Sahara to the Hausalands, of new Muslim states that were led by religious authorities.

As mentioned, until then Islam had been marginal to the socio-political systems of states that were Muslim in name. One result, however, of the upheavals of the seventeenth century was the articulation of new ideologies of social organisation. B. Hall described in some detail how for instance the Arabic or Berber-speaking populations of the Southern Sahara started to emphasise their Arab-Islamic identity when they saw the chance to gain power after the collapse of Songhay, as the ideological basis for their authority. A preferred way to do this was by creating genealogies that linked them to Islamic ancestors.[108] Foundational myths, for instance about the mythical character of 'Uqba al-Mustajab,

[104] N. Levtzion, 'Patterns of Islamization in West Africa.' In *Conversion to Islam.* N. Levtzion, ed. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979. The point is repeated in N. Levtzion, 'Sociopolitical Roles of Muslim Clerics and Scholars.' In: E. Cohen e.a. eds. *Comparative Social Dynamics. Essays in honor of N. Eisenstadt,* Boulder Colorado: Praeger, 1985; and in 'Islam in the Bilād al-Sūdān to 1800' in N. Levtzion, *Islam in Africa and the Middle East. Studies on Conversion en Renewal*. Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2007.

[105] The involvement of scholars in trade networks is particularly well explored by G. Lydon. (See G. Lydon, *On Transsaharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth Century Western Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Especially chapter 7.) Although her work is focussed on West Africa in the nineteenth century, it explains the situation of scholars in an earlier period and in central sudanic Africa as well. In the first place, she argues, long-distance traders needed all sorts of legal services, for which they hired legal specialists (*fuqaha* sg. *faqīh*) resident in the main cities of the trade routes. Secondly, on the family level, the commercial success of some members allowed others to devote themselves to learning. Finally, scholars escorted caravans as judges and religious men, and many used these journeys for some own trade, and their profits to collect books for their own libraries.

[106] Of course, the religious ideas of the more independent scholars could be influenced by practical and commercial too. It is interesting for instance to note that Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, whose family was very successful in trade, immediately adopted a positive attitude towards the religiously contested commodity of tobacco.

[107] Levtzion 1979, 215.

[108] Hall 2005.

originate in this period.[109] The same happened in other parts of West Africa: first Islam gained importance for the identity of politically dominant communities. It was partly the success of ʿulamāʾ who had been able to promote Islam as the only source of legitimacy for rulers. Then, more commoners moved towards Islam, 'because it was the way to identify oneself with the socio-political system and its values. Those who remained pagan, irrespective of their numbers, were relegated to the lowest status and to the fringes of society.'[110]

For new converts, Islam came to represent the civilisation of luxury goods and knowledge that merchants and scholars brought from across the desert. It presented a culture of global dimension, supported by a God of global power, sustained by sciences, techniques (related to writing) and prayer of superior effectivity. At a practical level, Islam offered the members of the community of believers, the *umma*, access to networks of trade, to prestige and social emancipation. So more people converted. The *rapprochement* between ʿulamāʾ and peasants provided the former with social and political arguments for reform, and with the strength that lies in numbers.

But the developments also involved gradual changes that did not only strengthen the position of 'ulamā'. For one, as more commoners became Muslims, Islam popularised and a new variety of religious specialists responded to popular demands. It sometimes had a negative influence on the image of the profession of the scholar *(ʿālim*), as we will see in the next chapter. Also, as Islam gained political importance, rulers tended to grow suspicious of its specialists, who might always find causes to cast doubt on the justness of the formers´ governance. As mentioned, the rulers of Bornu had themselves installed 'ulamā' in rural communities to stimulate the growth of Islam there. However, these *mallemtis*, as such communities led by scholars were called, attracted more followers than they had foreseen, and were also places where ʿulamāʾ who refused to compromise with the ruling class and their religious views withdrew. Their growing influence in rural areas became disconcerting to the political establishment. At a time when the state of Bornu was under continual attack from outside, the authorities in Birni Gazargamu became weary of many religious experts. Losing their footing, they came to fear the urban ʿulamāʾ for the metaphysical powers they might use against patrons who could no longer offer them what they had been able to offer before. And they were even more concerned about the activity of preachers who lived beyond their direct control, among heavily taxed peasants ready to jump at the opportunity to cast off the yoke of their exploitation by the royal urban elite. Early in the seventeenth century, one generation before al-Wālī, there seems to have been a movement of political preaching against the Sefuwa that resulted in the withdrawal of support for the dynasty by local chiefs and other government 'officers'.[111] It led sultan'Umar b. Idrīss, incited by scholars around him, to order the arrest of two ʿulamāʾ, one of whom (the Tuareg shaykh al-Jirmī) was killed, while his friend, shaykh al-Waldīdī (more commonly known as al-Waldede), was banned to Baghirmi.[112]

Sufism

Another factor that played a role in the spread of Islam and affected the position of ʿulamāʾ is mysticism. Two ideas are characteristic of mysticism in Islam: surrender of the soul to God, and striving to achieve a gnostic comprehension of religious knowledge or truth. Let's start with the second, gnosis. In principle, it does not exclude the approach of rational comprehension of another type of religious knowledge, and in practice mysticism and 'orthodox' religious scholarship have often been combined by Muslims throughout the ages. [113] The two approaches are based on the understanding in Islam of reality and knowledge as divided in two – existing in both the natural and

[109] Cf. M. Nobili, 'Back to Saharan Myths: Preliminary Notes on 'Uqba al-Mustajab.' In *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, 11 (2012).
[110] Levtzion 1979, 215.
[111] Alkali 2013, 256.
[112] Lavers 1971; H. Bobboyi, *The ʿUlama of Borno: A Study of the Relations between Scholars and State under the Sayfawa, 1470-1808*. Dissertation. (Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1992): 99 ff. The fate of the shaykhs al-Waldede and al-Jirmī was described in *Infāq al-maysūr*, Or. 14.063, 4r.
[113] For West Africa in particular this point is made by C. Stewart 1976, 87 ff, and R. Seesemann 2011.

the supernatural world, the manifest (*ẓāhir*) and the hidden (*bāṭin*) realms. In this view, religious knowledge of the natural world is pre-eminently knowledge of God's laws, and therefore the field of jurists and specialists of hadith, while hidden knowledge was the realm of mystics or ṣūfīs. It was commonly accepted that the natural and the supernatural worlds are connected in a way that is explained by Ibn Khaldūn: the natural world that is perceived by the senses, comprises a hierarchy of spheres, whose elements can be transformed into the next sphere, from the most substantial to the least substantial, that is from earth, matter, man and animals to water, then to air, then to fire. We perceive that this visible world is influenced by an invisible spiritual force—that is, the soul. The soul is in principle connected with another invisible level, that of angels, where it can acquire supernatural perceptions.[114] This is what explains prophecy for instance, for prophecy is the state of direct and independent contact between the essence of a prophet and the angels. Knowledge at this level can also be attained by others, when their soul lingers in a transitory phase, for example in dreams or on the verge of death. Some people, such as diviners and ṣūfīs, use spiritual exercise or other methods to access this stage, that is to temporarily let their soul transform pass from the stage of humanity to that of angels and perceive what is supernatural, and sometimes called intuitive knowledge.

Nevertheless, in the history of Islam, mysticism has also been regarded with at least a frown by the majority of more rationally inclined theologians, who sometimes pointed out, as Ibn Khaldūn did, that Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) started as a tradition of asceticism and pietism, and that striving towards intuitive knowledge should always be secondary to ṣūfīs. What the true ṣūfī seeks is the perception of a 'state' of complete devotion, which he reaches via a fixed path. In the final state of devotion the soul is transformed from its human to an angelic state, where it can behold divine truth. As the 'veil' of sensual perception is gradually removed from him, it becomes possible to perceive hidden truths. However, perceiving hidden knowledge is not the primary aim of the real ṣūfī, although it may come to him. There are those who seek removal of the veil of sensual perception, through hunger or ecstasy for instance, for reasons that are not 'straightforward', for instance because they do have personal prestige as a goal. What they perceive will be distorted in the manner of an image in a distorted mirror. Their utterances are suspect, and can lead believers astray. By definition ṣūfī knowledge can never be verified by others, since it depends on a subjective experience, expressed in a terminology that ṣūfīs do not share with the uninitiated. Therefore, as long as a ṣūfī is not known to be of excellent character, his utterances in a state of ecstasy deserve censure.

One concept in Sufism especially raised eye-brows among non-ṣūfī theologians - namely the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the unity of creation. It implies that God is one with His creation, that He is incarnated in it. All the particulars of matter, colour, substance, heat and cold are there only because we perceive them with our senses, but if we were not there to perceive them they would not exist, because the world, God, and all existence would appear as one. The objections of other theologians ranged from the accusation that this came very close to denying God His own One uniqueness to the argument that it was scientific nonsense to say that something is not perceived at any given time, does not exist.

But, as said, the ṣūfī aim of surrender to God was generally respected, and since the twelfth century it was not separate from Islamic religious life in general.[115] Surrender to God can be reached along a path (*ṭarīqa,* pl. *ṭuruq*) of purification of the heart or self-annihilation (*fanā'*), to make room for God. Ideally, ṣūfīs travels this path guided by a spiritual leader or shaykh to whom they obey and who is the focus of their mutual solidarity. They are often organised in hierarchically structured brotherhoods, also called *ṭuruq*, around a leading shaykh. Many ṣūfī shaykhs, anywhere in the Muslim world, chose to live among people away from the centres (and books and libraries), where they responded to their needs for teaching, ritual and authoritative opinions, with the resources available to them. The fact that they were more responsive to the realities of life in different communities than to doctrinal assertions,

[114] Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History. Translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, I, 194-202.
[115] J. Walbridge, *God and Logic in Islam. The Caliphate of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 88.

along with the appeal of this organised solidarity has played an important role in the vulgarisation of Islam in all parts of the Muslim world.[116]

However, the history of Sufism in sudanic Africa before the nineteenth century is still largely obscure. For instance, although believers in the region today accord much importance to Sufism and its contribution to the history of Islam there, the number of works on Sufism extant in West African libraries is surprisingly small.[117] Researchers do agree that from the fifteenth century on, ṣūfī brotherhoods existed in the southern Sahara among Berbers, who developed a strong tradition in which mysticism and jurisprudence were combined. In their nomadic communities, where a central political authority was lacking, the authority to mediate in conflicts lay with jurists who had knowledge of the written law as well as intuitive knowledge of God's intentions.[118]

Via Aïr and other regions in the Sahara the study of Sufism, notably the Qadiriyya form (inspired by the Persian mystic 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī, d. 1166) appears to have spread to other parts of the *bilād al-sūdān*. It is believed that al-Maghīlī, who advised a number of African rulers late in the fifteenth century, may have been affiliated to the Qadiriyya or the Shādhiliyya *ṭarīqa* - perhaps to both – and that he also propagated Sufism in Kano and Katsina when he was there. Chronicles and religious texts indicate that indivual 'ulamā' practised asceticism and had cherished gnostic ideas since the fifteenth century.[119] In the sixteenth century, the work of the ṣūfī al-Shādhilī (d. 1258) was known in Timbuktu, through the comments of Aḥmad al-Zarrūq (d. 1493), a Maghribi author who also commented on the work of the Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240).[120] And in the seventeenth century, in Bornu in particular, there may have been a shift in the tradition of Qur'ān exegesis towards more ṣūfī oriented tafsīr.[121]

The traces of ṣufi brotherhoods become slightly more distinct in the seventeenth century. Some indicate the existence of communities of ṣūfī scholars in Bornu and in the sources we find contacts between these communities and ṣūfī shaykhs of the Kunta in the Aïr region, and Qadiriyya communities in the Nile valley.[122] The most well-known of these communities in Bornu was that of Kalumbardo, a place about fifty miles northeast of Birni Gazargamu, which attracted increasing numbers of people who came there to study or receive religious services and advice. The men who lived in Kalumbardo were reported to meditate in the morning, and in the afternoon to pray and repeat the shahada, 'beating their hands on their thighs', which suggests rhythmical movement to reach ecstasy or trance.'[123]

It was in the nineteenth century, with the emergence of the community around Aḥmad al-Tijānī (1737-1815),[124] that Sufism became so important in the region that for many believers their identity as Muslims was inextricably bound up with some form of adherence to a *ṭarīqa*. In the twentieth century, it was rare to find a Muslim here who did not profess adherence to the Tijaniyya or the Qadiriyya brotherhood, although in practice many would not have a shaykh or be initiated to the *wird* of either.

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[116] See e.g. R. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period. An Essay in Quantitative History.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979: 61 ff.

[117] Hall and Stewart 2011, 139-140. Also Norris, H.T., The Tuareg – Their Islamic Legacy and its Diffusion in the Sahel. Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1975; Sūfī mystics of the Niger Desert: Sīdī Maḥmūd and the Hermits of Aïr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

[118] Stewart 1976, 87. I.M. Lapidus, *A history of Islamic societies*. Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 500, 501.

[119] N. Levtzion, *Islam in African and Global Contexts: Adventures in Comparative Studies of Islam. In Islam in Africa and the Middle East. Studies on Conversion and Renewal*. Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2007, VII, 6. J.-L. Triaud, Le thème confrérique en Afrique de l'ouest. In *Les ordres mystiques dans l'Islam*. Paris: Ed. De l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1985.

[120] Hall and Stewart 2011, 140.

[121] D. Bondarev, 'Tafsīr sources in four annotated Qur'anic manuscripts from ancient Borno.' (Forthcoming)

[122] Hiskett 1994, 103-106; Lavers 1981; Alkali 2013, 255, 290.

[123] Lavers 1971 and 1981, 221.

[124] N. Levtzion 1985; Stewart 1976, 90.

What is important to note is, that in this context and for common believers, to consider someone a great Muslim scholar meant to consider him a great ṣūfī scholar, or a great ṣūfī *tout court*.

As we have noted, the different approaches to and methods of acquiring knowledge, of manifest and hidden laws, were not, in principle, mutually exclusive. In the course of time, however, more emphasis was placed on the mystical path to truth as a form of counterknowledge – that is knowledge that came not from books but from inspiration or divine guidance. M. Last has suggested that such counterknowledge offered a solution to a scarcity of books in Bornu, Kano and Timbuktu in the late seventeenth and in the eighteenth centuries, and at the same time that it was a way to escape the power of those who controlled access to key books, on law and jurisprudence, for instance.[125] Mysticism as counterknowledge could drive a wedge between ṣūfīs and 'official' clerics and create a distance that was increased by the fact that ṣūfī communities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tended to settle on the borders of the territory that was controlled from the capital. Thus, Kalumbardo as well as another ṣūfī community in Gaskeru were on the ecological border between settled zones and nomadic life in the desert. They were uncomfortable places to live in and they were chosen to emphasise the renunciation of worldly concerns. However, as Bobboyi notes, they were also conducive to distrust *by* the world.[126] The above mentioned shaykhs al-Waldede and al-Jirmī, who were persecuted by Bornu's Sultan, had lived in Kalumbardo and are associated with political dissension from a ṣūfī background. Based on readings of written historical sources, such as those of Bello and M.A. Landeroin, as well as on interviews with modern keepers and transmitters of oral history in the region, the Nigerian historian Alkali believes that the Sefuwa rulers, desirous 'to suppress any form of religious faction that might be detrimental to the established position of the government', 'were against the development of Sufism', [127]

Apart from geographical distance and political dissension, there was perhaps another reason for discomfort among rulers and the ʿulamā' who were associated with them. Although Sufism and book learning had long gone hand in hand, and would continue to do so in many cases, the beginnings of a parting of their ways can also be discerned in this period. Lavers described 'what can only be called "extreme" manifestations of sufism' in seventeenth century Bornu, that were anti-intellectualist or that at least advocated the possibility of the displacement of scholarship as a result of the development of ecstatic practices.[128] He explains his observation with the example of a shaykh called 'Abdallāh b. 'Abd al-Jalīl (d. ca. 1677), an immigrant (Tubu according to Lavers, Koyam according to Alkali and The Cambridge History of Africa Vol IV) who had been allowed to settle in the remote village of Belbelec around the middle of the century. He was a Qadiriyya ṣūfī who was known to be favoured by God with miracles that sometimes happened to him. His large group of followers believed that his knowledge came directly from God, because he claimed that he never studied or read, but only meditated and prayed. He was reported to be a very humble and kind man, who converted great numbers of people. In this case, the established ʿulamā' in Birni Gazargamu seem to have been concerned, not so much about political dissension that 'Abd al-Jalīl fomented, but more about the success of his religious practice. They may have felt that the basis for their own position – their knowledge of the Islamic texts, even if some of them were illiterate and relied entirely on memory - was under attack. They convinced Mai 'Alī to arrest him. This 'complot' of the Gazargamu scholars failed, but 'Abd al-Jalīl was killed by Tuareg a few years later, in 1677 or 1678.[129]

Al-Wālī was not a member of the social group of clerics in Bornu's capital. But he had studied there and he must have maintained contacts with the city. News about 'Abdallāh b. 'Abd al-Jalīl, who lived and died in his life-time, must have been part of his exchanges with visitors and travellers, and the competition for religious supremacy was part of the background to his own thinking.

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[125] M. Last 2011, 175-211.
[126] Bobboyi 1992, 155.
[127] Alkali 2013, 257; 290. M.A. Landeroin, *Documents Scientifiques de la Mission Tilho*. Paris: 1910.
[128] Lavers 1981, 217.
[129] Lavers 1971, 3.3; Alkali 2013, 288-290.

3. Ethnicity, religion and slavery

The growth and wealth of states such as Songhay and Bornu were to a large extent based on the work of slaves and the profits of the sale of slaves. Leo Africanus noticed that the king of Bornu had indeed no other source of income to speak of than the slaves he procured from neighbouring countries.[130] Much later, European travellers learned that slaves constituted the main and indispensable labour force for agriculture in the region, and in some cases even served as valuta.[131] It had been so for hundreds of years, partly for a simple and technical reason: land in the Sahel has a thin top soil, which produce poor yields. To feed a community, a relatively large surface of land must be tilled. What was scarce in this situation was manpower. It was complemented by the labour of people who were forced to work for the benefit of others. [132] In general, rulers could enslave and sell people from among their own subjects, but more often slaves were taken from neighbouring peoples.

To this existing African practice were added ideas about slaves from the religion and the laws of the prophet Muḥammad. In Sunni Islam a slave had no individual rights and no honour, and although it was recommended, it was not obligatory to manumit slaves who converted to Islam. [133] Various authors have pointed out that the status and living conditions of domestic slaves in central sudanic Africa were often not so bad. For those who lived with peasants – and in Bornu it was common for peasants to own one or more slaves – daily life was not different from that of free men who were poor and bound to supply a part of their harvest, their yields from fishery or hunting or their services to a local chief or a king. They lived with a free family, laboured together with their owner, could marry into his family and earn prestige through their work.[134] At the Muslim court of Gazargamu, slaves could attain high positions and be appointed to administrative offices which gave him authority over free men and women. In practice, the social division in Bornu between slaves and free men was vertical, and cut through the classes, as it had done in pre-Islamic Kanuri society.[135]

On the other hand, the high status of some slaves did nothing to change the view held of those who were considered to be their 'kind' as inferior. Nor did it mitigate the disaster suffered by village communities which lost members to slavery, or the extremely harsh fate of those who were sold and made to walk through the desert to the Maghrib or the Middle East. The fear of being caught was ever-present. Numerous sources reveal how tribes throughout central sudanic Africa carried out yearly raids on their neighbours, to supplement poor harvests or even just to celebrate someone's homecoming.[136] In the longer term, it led to the disappearance of communities and ethnic groups, and to the movement of populations that sought refuge from raids to peripheral and hard-to-access areas such as the Mandara Mountains or the flood plains of Baghirmi.[137]

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[130] Levtzion, 'Slavery and the Slave trade in the Early States of Bilād al-Sūdān.' In: N. Levtzion, 2007.
[131] Barth 1857, II, 228.
[132] R.A. Austen, 'Imperial Reach versus Institutional Grasp. Superstates of the West and Central African Sudan in Comparative Perspective.' In *Journal of Early History,* 13 (2009): 509-541; 516. Cambridge History of Africa, III, J.D. Fage and R. Oliver eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 273.
[133] Since the beginning of Islam there were different attitudes towards slaves and slavery. However, until modern times increase of commerce in the Islamic world went together with an enormous increase in the trade and use of slaves. For a discussion of the status of slaves in Islam through history, see W.G. Clarence-Smits, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*. London: Hurst and Company, 2006.
[134] Lovejoy 1978; M. Hiskett, 'Introduction' In C.L. Temple, *Native Races and their Rulers.* London: Frank Cass & Co, second ed. 1968.
[135] Brenner 1973, 89, 90; R. Cohen 1970, 'Social Stratification in Bornu.' In *Social Stratification in Africa.* A. Tuden and L. Plotnicov, eds. New York: The Free Press, 1970.
[136] E.g. G. Nachtigal, *Sahara and Sudan*. Transl. by A. G.B. Fisher and H.J. Fisher. London: C. Hurst & Company, 1974, III, 29.
[137] MacEachern 2001, 144-145.

Slave-raids were a constant danger especially for non-Muslim populations living on the margins of Muslim countries. The Sharī'a stipulated that only non-Muslims could be enslaved - in theory when they were captured during a jihād and refused to convert to Islam. This seemingly simple rule however, was not unequivocal in the African situation. The problem was to determine who was Muslim. In principle, the religion of the ruler was the religion of his people, and an individual was Muslim when his king was an acknowledged Muslim. Muḥammad Bello formulated this early in the nineteenth century, but the idea was much older and valid in all of West Africa. But it left much room for variation and discussion. On the one hand, people who maintained non-Islamic practices could often pass for Muslims. On the other, the Muslims of certain ethnic groups could not shake off an ambiguous status.[138] For instance, 'Muslim' villages that did not pay their taxes to a Sultan, were easily accused of 'kafirring' (practising paganism) and not saying their prayers. '[This] is however', wrote the British traveller Dixon Denham in the first half of the nineteenth century, 'a fault which is generally laid to the charge of any nation against whom a true Musselman wages war, as it gives him the power of making them slaves.'[139] In practice then, Muslim communities were not entirely safe from slave-raiders.[140]

The relation between religion and being a slave was further confused by the issue of skin colour. An informative illustration comes from an anecdote about a man from Tuwat, who wrote to Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī asking him to shed light on the matter.[141] He asked whether it was allowed to own slaves originating from Bornu, Kano, Gao or Katsina, lands that were known to be Muslim. His doubt came from the fact that slaves from these countries were being sold in the market in Tuwat. Had they been captured by pagans, or had Muslims enslaved each other in conflict? And did it not matter whether people had converted voluntarily or by force. That is, was it not the case that Muslims who had been converted by force had less of a right to be spared from enslavement than others? 'You should know that the reason for slavery is non-belief,' answered al-Tinbuktī. 'Whoever is captured in a condition of non-belief, it is legal to own him, but not he who was converted to Islam voluntarily, from the beginning, whether it (the nation he belongs to) be Bornu, Kano, Songhai, Katsina, Gobir, Mali or some of Zakzak.'[142] In his view too, one's religious identity was linked to that of the group or 'nation' one belonged to, and to what was known of the history of its conversion, with or without the sword. A slave who can prove that he is from a known Muslim country should be freed. Next, Aḥmad Bābā explained that the status of peoples who are enslavable, is not related to the colour of their skin. Apparently, this view was not commonly shared.

Explaining his confusion, the letter-writer had also referred to a ḥadīth which is often invoked in this context. It relates how the black skin colour *and* slave status of the descendants of Noah's son Ham were the result of a curse Noah had laid upon him. Did this justify the slavery of black people, Muslim or not? No, it was an unsound ḥadīth, wrote Aḥmad Bābā – before ending his letter with a list of peoples from which it was legal to take slaves, because they were considered unbelievers.

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[138] Indeed, communities sometimes 'converted' to Islam hoping that this would save them from raids, but without religious conviction. Conversion to Islam as a strategy to escape slavery is explicit e.g. in D. Denham e.a., 1831, II, 40- 41.

[139] Denham e.a. 1831, I, 92. See also Hiskett 1975, 100. Living in a village in stead of a town was never very helpful for a Muslim reputation. Reading Hiskett's translations of parts of al-Hajrami's *Shurb al-zulāl* (1962; see Chapter 3) or 'Uthmān dan Fodio's *Naṣā'iḥ al-ummat al-muḥammadiyya* (ms Hunwick 151, NU), one realises that proper Muslim behaviour as these authors saw it was difficult in any village: it implied for instance that women could not go to their garden to cultivate or to fetch wood nor go the market.

[140] V.N. Low, *Three Nigerian Emirates*. Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1972. 124.

[141] Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, Mi'rāj *al-ṣu'ūd ilā nayl ḥukm majlūb al-sūd*. See for a translation B. Barbour and M. Jacobs, The Mi'raj: a legal treatise on slavery by Ahmad Baba. In *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*. Ed. J.R. Willis. London: Frank Cass, 1985, I.

[142] In the translation by Barbour and Jacobs 1979, 129. Two centuries later, Muḥammad Bello also published a work on the classification of peoples by their degree of Islam, *Taṣnīf al-qabā'il bi l-islām*. Ms Niamey 247 (WAAMD).

4. Islam and traditional religions

Numerous European authors, from Heinrich Barth to Murray Last, have remarked that many inhabitants they met of 'Muslim' regions indeed claimed to be Muslim, but adhered to customs as blatantly pagan as worshipping idols, trees and stones or eating pork.[143] Denham observed that in Bornu many outward signs that are usually associated with Islam had not been accepted in all parts of society, even in the capital. In the capital many women went about almost naked and those who dressed to go to the market left their heads uncovered. He noted that the entire population was addicted to gris-gris (amulets), and believed that the ridiculously large turbans worn at the royal court had to do with status and not religion. And he observed that throughout the long reign of the Sefuwa dynasty, kingship retained traits of the divine character it had had in pre-Islamic Kanem, where the mai was venerated like a god and was believed, for instance, never to need any food. Later scholars remarked that traditional beliefs and institutions were also integrated with Islam in more subtle ways. A good example is a custom of Fulani nomads that Paden learned about in the twentieth century, which combined the traditional age-grade system (regulating solidarity and social obligations according to membership in age groups) with the status of a believer. It stipulated that a man was not allowed to pray five times a day, and thus could not be a full Muslim, before he had a son old enough to herd cattle.[144]

As for Baghirmi, when Barth visited its capital Massenya, in the middle of the nineteenth century, he found that Muslim institutions were hardly in place at all, and he commented on the population: 'Their adoption of Islam is very recent and the greater part of them, even at the present day, with more justice be called Pagans than Mohammedans. They possess very little learning, only a few natives, who have performed the pilgrimage, being well versed in Arabic [...].'[145] In al-Wālī's time, the influence of Islam there was of course of much more recent date.

The 'mixing' (*ikhtilāṭ*) within social and religious practices of traditional beliefs and habits with Islam was a thorn in the flesh of the leaders of the Sokoto *jihād*. Addressing his flock, ʿUthmān dan Fodio explained extensively what sort of behaviour, apparently hard to give up, was unacceptably unislamic or an unauthorised 'innovation' of Islam.[146] Among the dozens of examples he gives are the social mixing of the sexes, the dancing of women at weddings, women going to the market, the greeting of high-ranking persons by prostration and putting dust on one's head, wailing and other rituals at funerals, inheritance by the female line, and relieving oneself in the manner of unbelievers.[147] Equally condemned were the use of Qur'anic verses for charms or cures, and the activities of so-called mallams (the term is reserved for popular ʿulamā', see the next chapter) who performed divination

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[143] For examples of and reflections on the persistence of traditional customs among Muslims in the region see e.g. Nachtigal 1974, III, 112-113, 163, 168; Last 1967, lxviii; Levtzion 2007, I, 19; H.J. Fisher, 'Conversion reconsidered: some historical aspects of religious conversion in black Africa.' In *Journal of the International African Institute* 43, I (1973): 20-40 (30, 33, 37); L. Manger ed. *Muslim Diversity. Introduction in Muslim Diversity*. Richmond UK: Curzon Press, 1999. lxix; Hiskett 1975, 17.
[144] Paden 1973, 49.
[145] Barth 1857, II, 561.
[146] Given the fact that people like Dan Fodio spoke of mixing these practices with Islam, can we also say that there existed a form of 'mixed' Islam? The problem is that the term has often been used to characterise 'African Islam' as discussed in the previous chapter, as a deficient form of 'real' Islam. Of course, it would be equally problematic to describe what this 'pure', 'real' or even 'orthodox' Islam was or is. Islam never had a set of beliefs that was regarded as dogma, nor synods or a papacy to define and defend it. In the early period of Islamic history, before the great Muslim empires formed a state 'orthodoxy', theology was, as A. Knysh writes, a 'perpetual collision of individual opinions over an invariant set of theological problems that eventually leads to a transient consensus that already contains the seeds of future disagreement', a never ending dialogue between equally legitimate interpretations. Heresiography, or more neutrally, doxography (the description of beliefs), was an important genre in classical scholarship, of assembling and comparing interpretations of theological questions, without judging them by a standard of true Islam. See A. Knysh, '"Orthodoxy" and "heresy" in medieval Islam: an essay in reassessment.' In *The Muslim World*, Vol 83, I (1993) 48-68, 53.
[147] Hiskett 1962, 587, 588; ms Hunwick 151.

much in the same way as traditional religious specialists had done before them.[148] According to Muḥammad Bello the situation was much worse in Bornu, where Muslims, he says, prostrated before their kings, sacrificed to rivers, stones and trees and consecrated the gates of their towns with blood.[149] The information is of course biased - this was after all the justification for the *jihād* against Bornu – but not in the sense that these things did not happen in Bornu, but rather that they also happened in the Sokoto sultanate. Authorities in Bornu saw the 'mixing' of Islam and non-Islamic habits as a problem in the rural hinterland especially. They sent mallams out to the villages to correct such behaviour, but to little avail.[150]

Most of our information comes from the nineteenth century and later. What is important here, is that from this information and the fact that the vulgarisation of Islam was more recent in the seventeenth century, we can deduce that the religious practices and beliefs in Muslim communities in al-Wālī's time were quite diverse. Conversion seldom involved (and nowadays seldom involves) complete abandonment of previously held beliefs. R. Bulliet distinguished two aspects of conversion to Islam, namely formal conversion (`a matter of eight words': *lā ilāh illa Allāh, wa Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*) and social conversion, by which he meant the movement of people from one religiously defined community to another, thus entailing changes in the composition of the Muslim population and its position in relation to adherents of other religions, with or without the development of Muslim institutions.[151] This social conversion in central Sudanic Africa (as in so many places) was a far from linear process. For F. Fuglestad, who looked at different types of political authority that were based either on traditional religions or on Islam, the competition between them is one of the processes that heavily mark the social history of central Sudanic Africa, especially from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth.[152]

The question of what made this competition so tough, or conversion to Islam so difficult, is fascinating. As we saw, there were good reasons to join the Muslim community. What were the equally good reasons not to do so? Of course, as Van Beek and Blakely point out in their overview of approaches to religion in Africa, religious experience and expression are always deeply rooted in tradition and bound with other aspects of culture and society, including politics, economics, social processes, illness and healing, art, music, dance and speech.[153] They are not easily discarded without ripping apart a whole system in which identities are rooted. But in order to understand more of the cultural context in which al-Wālī worked, it will be useful to try to say a bit more about the competitive strengths of traditional beliefs in Africa. Many authors have drawn attention to two themes that they consider as central in the religion of many people throughout Africa, namely the communal aspects and the reality and importance to them of spirits for human life.

To start with the first, the relation between the subject or the individual and his community (which includes the spirits of deceased ancestors) is crucial, more so than the relation between subject and God, and religious action is therefore action closely linked to social interaction.[154] Van Beek adds that notions of evil in these religions concur with characteristics of the social structure of the community of believers, and ways of coping with evil (the causes of disorder) reflect the stress of living with and at the same time without others.[155] At the same time, it is widely believed that the social structure reflects

[148] Hunwick 1970, 20; Paden 1973, 45.
[149] In many places in *Infāq al-maysūr*.
[150] Lovejoy 1980, 40.
[151] Bulliet 1979.
[152] F. Fuglestad, 'A reconsideration of Hausa History before the jihād.' In *Journal of African History* XIX, 3 (1978), 319-399. See also Levtzion's article about the integration of Islamic elements into African societies, Levtzion 1985.
[153] W.E.A. van Beek and T.D. Blakely 1994; 1.
[154] Van Beek and Blakely 1994, 18.
[155] W.E.A. van Beek, 'The Innocent Sorcerer: Coping with Evil in Two African Societies (Kapsiki & Dogon).' In Blakely, van Beek and Thomson 1994, 197-228.

order and disorder on a cosmological and moral level and that the members of a community must play their part in maintaining order on all levels. Religions and moral obligations are social obligations.[156]

Secondly, one of the most important characteristics of religion in Africa 'is the widespread belief in the existence of an invisible world populated by spirits of various sorts' write S. Ellis and G. ter Haar, who include the 'surviving remnants of those who have already passed through life'. [157] They are considered to be real and indeed more powerful than the living members of a community, because they are closer to God or the gods, and to have great influence on the welfare (health, success of crops and so on) of their descendants in this life, rewarding them for maintaining the religious and social order, and punishing them if they harm it. Correct relations among the living are not only a matter of social order, they are also a condition for the performance of many rituals—that is, for maintaining good relations with the spirits. One can not keep them up on one's own. This means that on the one hand, those who are different, pose a threat to the community, as many authors on witchcraft for example have pointed out.[158] On the other hand, the ultimate punishment for an individual is exclusion from the community here and now (which includes the phase of life as a spirit), and not in a hereafter as in Islam and Christianity present.

Such exclusion was and often still is achieved by a method that is deeply rooted in moral systems around the world, and that has attracted much attention from anthropologists, psychologists and others in the past decades, notably ostracising, which is justified by linking impurity and disgust to normative ethics.[159] Thus, the Kenga in Chad for instance, most of whom converted to Islam in the 1970s of the twentieth century, maintain that people who do not contribute to society because they are lazy or thieves or possess witchcraft which they do not control, must be completely excluded from communal life so that they have no other option than to leave the village. They believe that a thief will be punished with leprosy, blindness or a bad harvest, depending on the value of what he or she has stolen. Someone who lies too often will be given away by the fact that his tongue will swell until he always slobbers and becomes so repulsive that people will turn their backs on him. Similar examples can be found among all non-Muslim populations in rural Chad and Nigeria, and we will recognise one also in al-Wālī's direct environment.

Finally, another example from al-Wālī's own village today explains another way in which membership of an ethnic community that shares religious responsibilities offers practical security and protection. In January 2012 a Barma inhabitant of Abgar, a Muslim with non-Muslim ancestors, explained why the Barma of his generation were not scarified, contrary to the habits of many other ethnic groups in Baghirmi. It was not so much because Islam regarded scarification as a pagan custom, he said, but rather because scarifications were not needed anymore. `They were a mark of who you were, like a passport. Before, when people were kidnapped and brought to a strange place as slaves, other people there, members of their own ethnic group (*nafar*) perhaps, or a related one, might recognise them by their scars and decide to help them. When we became Muslims we could not be enslaved anymore, and there was no more need for scarification.'

This complex of ethnic identity, security and welfare that traditional religions offered, was what Islam asked people to give up, in return for three promises that were not always water-tight or were just very abstract: protection against slave-raiders, reward in the hereafter and the glory of a global religion. This explains, briefly, why conversion to Islam was often a long process of going back and forth. This meant that where groups of people had converted or even where Muslim government had been installed, the unity of these Muslim societies was often unstable. Even in the Sokoto caliphate, and a

[156] J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. New York: Heinemann, 1969; L. de Heusch, 'Myth and Epic in Central Africa' In Blakely, Van Beek and Thomson 1994, 229-239.
[157] S. Ellis and G. ter Haar, 'Religion and Politics in Africa' In Afrika Zamani 5 (1997) and 6 (1998), 221-246;
[158] E.g. Van Beek 1994, 205; P. Geschiere. *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997.
[159] See e.g. W.I. Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997; D. Kelly, *Yuck!: The nature and moral significance of disgust.* Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011.

fortiori in Bornu, Baghirmi and other regions in present-day Chad Muslims (and later Christians) would cherish the belief in the continuing involvement of ancestors in their life.

In the context of this struggle between traditional religions and Islam, the relation between those who identified themselves as Muslims and others whom they considered as not Muslim enough was especially sensitive. One form it took was that preachers of a radical and exclusivist sort questioned people on their knowledge of religion or the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) and accused them of unbelief if this knowledge was found to be insufficient. ‘Uthmān dan Fodio called them *mutakallimūn, theologians* but, although he disapproved of mixing pagan habits with the Muslim belief, he disliked these Pharisees even more.[160] A few years later his son Muḥammad Bello had lost all respect for them and described them as members of roaming ‘bands’ or ‘sects’ (*ṭā’ifa*).[161] They were ‘focussed on philosophical argumentation (*kalām*) and warned against ignorance and imitation’ in such an aggressive way, that people they questioned would ‘stutter and stammer’ with alarm, unable to produce the answers, even if they knew them. By the turn of the eighteenth century, this had gone to such extremes that, according to Bello, these fanatics accused anyone who could not read or write of unbelief. It all seriously troubled ‘Uthmān dan Fodio, who devoted an important part of his preaching and writings to opposing this type of mallams and their practices – without much success, because numerous manuscripts from the nineteenth and twentieth century testify to the continued practice of testing people’s knowledge of the Muslim faith.[162]

Our concern here is that in Dan Fodio’s time there existed a need among Muslims to mark the boundaries between themselves and those who were not Muslim enough. The writings of al-Wālī and anonymous popular texts that will be considered in the following chapters will show that the attitude already existed in his days. One reason for this, I suggest, is that conversion was a communal affair and ‘Muslim’ was a collective label. As we saw in the previous section of this chapter, a population was Muslim when its rulers were Muslim, and an individual was considered Muslim if his whole community had a firm Muslim identity. Much was at stake here, because of the ‘simplistic equation’[163] described above, of non-Muslim and black and slave and inferior. Populations in central sudanic, especially those living near the centre of power in Bornu, therefore needed the image of Muslim communities, if they wanted to be left alone by slave-raiding neighbours. The Muslim identity of convinced converts was weakened, however, by those who were not unambiguously Muslim, and this signified the threat of enslavability to them.

Among Muslims as well as the adherents of a traditional religion the worldview in al-Wālī’s time was mystical and reading the nineteenth century travelogues, one realises that this worldview was pervaded by awe before natural phenomena, but even more by fear, not only in the minds of the foreign travellers, but also in those of the people whose warnings and worries they recorded. The dusk, the dark and the world outside the towns and villages were dangerous places, inhabited by lions, tigers, witches, demons, robbers and enemies.

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[160] In *Ḥisn al-afhām*, quoted in M.A. al-Hajj, ‘The writings of Shehu Uthman dan Fodio: a plea for dating and chronology.’ In *Kano Studies*, NS 1 (2) (1974/77):7.

[161] Citations from Bello in this paragraph are from Or. 14063, 22r.

[162] Cf D.M. Last and M.A. al-Hajj, ‘Attempts at defining a Muslim in 19th century Hausaland and Bornu. In *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* III, 2 (1965), 231-241. The format of questions and answers has been popular in classical Islam as well as in Christianity. In central sudanic Africa innumerable texts are still being composed and memorised on this scheme. E.g. ‘Aqīdat ‘Alī b. Abū Ṭālib (ms Falke 2415) containing the passage: if you are asked: what is His name, then say: He is God and there is no god but Him. He knows what is hidden and what is evident. He is the merciful, the forgiving. If you are asked, what are his attributes, then say: He is the one God, he negates the many and their number, He is eternal and negates what is incomplete. He is not born, nor generated and He dismissed weakness and deficiency. Not one is like He. He negates all that is like Him. If you are asked: what is His essence? The say: nothing is like Him, he is the hearing the seeing. If you are asked: what are His deeds, then say: all days are His. If you are asked: what are the words of witness, then say: [etc]’. The *‘aqīda* reads as a short excerpt of the Ash‘arī doctrine on *tawḥīd*. Two manuscripts I copied in Chad in 2012, on ‘questions on theology’ (*musallat al-tawḥīd*) are 20th century examples of the genre.

[163] Hunwick 1991, 15.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the political and social turmoil, the drought and insecurity that had affected the populations of important parts of western sudanic Africa in the decades before, had reached Bornu too. S. Diagne, observing the reflections of this confusion in the historical works from Timbuktu, especially *Ta'rīkh al fattash* and *Ta'rīkh al-sudān*, remarks that there the philosophy of the time implied 'that the inobservance of the laws of God inevitably leads to decline and chaos'.[164] Pessimism and prophecies of doom. Hiskett still observes these in the religious sentiments of Hausa poets of the eighteenth century. This partly stemmed from an ancient ascetic tradition in Islam, he writes, but it also had to do with the experience of great changes in a world in which there were increasing challenges to till-then apparently valid assumption that the Muslims enjoyed God's protection.[165]

For educated Muslims, paganism became a symbol of decline and disarray.[166] For the less educated, the imagined fundamental difference in the lifestyle of neighbouring unbelievers only encouraged their fears. This still comes through, for instance, in the work of Urvoy, when he writes about the struggle against '*paiens farouches*' and '*agressifs*'.[167] Before him, Barth had mentioned that north of the Benue lived 'warlike pagan tribes'.[168] Nachtigal heard that pagan peoples south of Bornu were cannibals, and met the leader of a Kanembu tribe who asked unquestioning support from his Arab allies 'against everything with a dark skin'.[169] More direct witness of such fears can be found in the manuscript collections, which are full of prayers and charms (*fā'ida*) to protect those who had to travel through pagan lands. [170]

5. Conclusion

The seventeenth century was a time of profound upheaval and great change in West Africa, from what is now Mauritania to Lake Chad. In the first half of the century, around the time when al-Wālī was born, Bornu had reached the zenith of its power. The scale of its trade was larger than ever. On the markets one could find goods and hear names and ideas that testified that the kingdom was part of a world that reached via Timbuktu and Tlemcen (in today´s Algeria) to al-Andalus and via Tripoli and Cairo to Istanbul, the centre of the Ottoman Empire.

Along with the blossoming of the economy however, insecurity had increased as well. The political instability that had been caused by the collapse of the empire of Songhay, and which had initially benefitted trade along the eastern trans-Saharan route, now began to undermine the welfare of Bornu too. Groups of nomadic Berbers from the Southern Sahara were displaced and were forced to look for new routes for their cattle, while some farming populations to the south of Bornu recovered their strength. Throughout the seventeenth century, continuous attacks on Bornu by Tuareg from the north and from pagan Jukun from the south were a growing burden for peasants, merchants, ruling classes and scholars. When al-Wālī was growing up, the impact of the collapse of Songhay and of concomitant social changes were already clear.

Among ʿulamā' a need developed to change the attitude of compromise with the ruling elites that had been the habit of many, and to either withdraw to relatively isolated communities where they could practice what they saw as pure Islam, or to help organise governance and public life according to Muslim rules of governance. With the help of changes in the hierarchy of lineages and ethnic groups,

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164 S.B. Diagne, 'Towards an intellectuel history of West Africa: the meaning of Timbuktu.' In *The meaning of Timbuktu*. S. Jeppie and S.B. Diagne eds. Cape Town: HRSC Press, 2008. 22.
165 Hiskett 1975, 87-88.
166 See e.g. Hiskett 1960, 567.
167 Y. Urvoy, *Histoire de l'empire de Bornou. Memoires de l'institut français d'Afrique noire,* no 7. Paris: Librairies Larose, 1949. 80.
168 Barth 1857, II, 191.
169 Nachtigal 1974, III, 27 and 55.
170 See also P.E. Lovejoy, *Caravans of Kola*. Zaria, Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello Univ. Press, 1980. 104.

groups of ʻulamā in the region succeeded in establishing Islam as the only source of legitimacy for dominant political formations. As a consequence, Islam also became more important for commoners who wished to have the best possible relation with those in power. These developments fostered what was perhaps the most profound and far-reaching change of this period: the adoption of Islam by important numbers of common people in the rural areas, and the movement of increasing numbers of ʿulamā' there.

As a result the social position of ʿulamā' changed. On the one hand, their relation with the rulers was modified. In Bornu, ʿulamā' had supported the political authority of the Sefuwa dynasty for centuries. Now members of this dynasty often felt threatened by ʿulamā' who preached in rural areas, and sometimes they even persecuted them. The scholarly profession also faced changes from another side. Growing demand among rural populations for religious experts in Islam gave room to a variety of specialists who all claimed some status as *ʿālim*, but often did not have a scholarly education, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Moreover, the image of the scholarly and intellectual religious specialist may have come under some pressure from a third direction. While mysticism and scholarship had long been complementary aspects of the education and the role of ʿulamā', the merit of intellectual knowledge was now sometimes put into perspective by ṣūfīs some of whom even prided themselves in religious knowledge and authority without the intermediary of any book-learning, suggesting that their divine inspiration was superior to it.

Another consequence of the vulgarisation of Islam was a certain confusion of identities. Conversion was rarely a linear process, and very often the pull of traditional religions in which social organisation and morals were firmly bound together, remained strong. Individuals and groups who had adopted Islam, retained habits and loyalties to their old religions, so that the boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims were blurred.

Those who chose for Islam and the Muslim identity – still a minority in Baghirmi, Bornu and even in its capital Birni Gazargamo - had good reasons for their choice: not only did it offer them a new link to the dominant socio-political values, to trade networks and to a global culture, it also offered protection, in principle, against the threat of being captured as slave. Slavery was of great importance to the economy of Bornu, both for agriculture and as a commodity. Slaves were captured for and sold by Muslim merchants in conjunction with the Muslim ruling elites. The principle that only non-Muslims could be enslaved was the reason why some communities saw an extra political and economic interest in defining themselves or others as Muslim or not, which rather obscured the matter. At the same time, more ambiguity added to the need to mark boundaries between the two. The question of how Muslims went about this, and how they construed their own identity, will be addressed in following chapters (5 and 6). Here we saw already that their emancipation and their consciousness of a new identity within a context of political decline, disarray and insecurity eventually led to the 'othering' of non-Muslims. 'Pagans' or unbelievers came to symbolise threats and chaos.

This was the age in which al-Wālī worked. These were the outlines of the world to which he responded and contributed, and which will emerge more sharply through a reading of his works.